

Was I Truly a Follower of The Way?

In October of 1972 I became personally involved with The Way Ministry in Dallas, Texas, shortly after my dynamic, life-altering introduction to "The Jesus Revolution." On June 17th of that same year I had stood up in a large crowd in downtown Dallas (in an open area where a new freeway was to be built); I was standing up in response to Billy Graham's "altar call", so to speak, in order to accept the essence of John 3:16. This downtown gathering was the last day of a massive, week-long event called Explo '72 (due to its intention to have an *explosive*, evangelical impact.) Months later, I was still giddy from the overwhelming excitement of having gone quickly from holding vague agnostic beliefs - and a negative outlook on life - to exuberantly embracing a form of Christianity within a handful of different groups, mostly with a Pentecostal-Charismatic focus. One such group was known as "The Way International," in which I would eventually participate enthusiastically for decades.

Perhaps a tiny bit of historical background concerning the Way's powerful growth near that time (of the late sixties and early seventies) in close conjunction with "The Jesus People Movement" (or "The Jesus Revolution") will be somewhat of interest. In a meticulously detailed analysis titled *God's Forever Family (The Jesus People Movement in America)* by Larry Eskridge, one can see the roots of The Way's dynamic growth, instead of it remaining as a relatively small, local ministry in western Ohio. On pages 50-52 (subheading: *Pastor Wierwille Comes Calling*) and pages 106-109 (subheading: *The Way West and East: Mill - Valley, California, and Rye, New York*) one sees the eventual impact of Victor Paul Wierwille's 1968 visit to early leaders (like Ted Wise) of the Living Room and the House of Acts centers in the Haight Ashbury district of San Francisco. Two key couples, Steve and Sandi Heefner and Jim and Judy Doop (pronounced "Dopp") became increasingly influenced by Wierwille's systematic Bible teachings, as compiled in a class called Power For Abundant Living (PAL or PFAL.) Extremely rapid outreach through "The Way West " (in California) and "The Way East " (in Rye, New York) quickly sparked a nationwide growth of mostly young people, avidly receiving and promoting Wierwille's recorded, 33 hour package of PFAL instruction. In

chapter 6, pages 67-90 ("The Hippies Turn On") of *The Cult That Snapped (A Journey Into The Way International)* by Karl Kahler, one can garner some well-researched details about the Heefners, the Doops, other enthusiastic people, and some divisive controversies as The Way rapidly expanded.

By the way, the name of "The Way" (used since the 1950s) was derived from the basic concept, (as indicated in Acts 9:2 and other references), that believers in the Messiah were called "the Way" before being called "Christians" (Acts 11:26). It was all because first century believers considered themselves to be followers of Jesus, who was designated as "the way, the truth, and the life" in John 14:6. I now repeat my title, a somewhat rhetorical question: **Was I truly a follower of The Way?** Or, in considering my close association with fellow colleagues for decades, were **we** truly followers of The Way? To lucidly approach such a challenging question, of course, means assessing some of our basic "Way Ministry" beliefs and practices in light of a humble, panoramic view of the Scriptures, which we ardently professed as our sole standard for determining what is important and true.

Before delving into very few biblical, logical, and historical factors, I would like to simply mention that I am not in any doubt in regards to the strong degree of **sincerity** among the devoted folks from my background!

Nevertheless, I freely remind *us*, as a dedicated group, of an old "Way" proverb, used quite boldly by Victor Paul Wierwille in his 1967 recording of the PFAL class: "**Sincerity is no guarantee for truth.**" So, instead of settling for a comfortable, sincere set of convictions we must always challenge ourselves to stay **truthful**. I can certainly recall **now** - having come to the stark realization that I had been badly **mistaken** about key, vital, biblical truths for three or four decades!

I can certainly be thankful for many good aspects of learning and for fond friendship memories throughout the years, while at the same time becoming **discerning** about **misleading influences**. Many times, I have had to ask myself quite frankly, did I ever go with the flow of questionable doctrines, habits, and examples due to coercive pressure to conform to a group-think mentality?

Now, I would like to address a system of beliefs about salvation on which I formerly staked my life. This highly condensed presentation of what took me several years to unravel might be a real challenge to assimilate in one sitting!

The underlying assumption which is basic to Way theology (and many of The Way's continued, modern splinter groups) is that the four gospels are **not addressed** to Christians, but they were written **to** Jews only in an "administration" (a period of time) **before** the Day of Pentecost (which teaching is really an adaptation of the "dispensational" theology of E. W. Bullinger, who wrote the extensive notes for *The Companion Bible*). We even gave practical examples of how Jesus' teachings in the gospels were not relevant for Christians (as seen on pages 207-225 of the book: *Power for Abundant Living* by Victor Paul Wierwille). So, "salvation" for those becoming Christians, according to fundamental Way theology, was not based at all on Jesus' words and warnings, nor on his repeated plea for **repentance** from sinful or ignorant behavior.

We in The Way based salvation on sincerely **confessing Jesus as lord** (according to a formulaic usage of Romans 10:9) and believing in Jesus' resurrection. We embraced this simplistic system joyfully, while failing to see the stark irony of professing Jesus' lordship **without** being committed to following and obeying his teachings. For example, Luke 6:46 states that Jesus said: "Why do you call me 'lord, lord,' but don't do what I tell you to do?" We, as a group, missed Jesus' point very badly!

Historically, "dispensationalism" (the theological distinguishing between strict time periods) is a fairly "new" theoretical model which was developed in England among the followers of Edward Irving and, more famously, among the Plymouth Brethren (under the leadership of J.N. Darby) in about 1830, many centuries after the New Testament was written. Later on, the Scofield Bible (with dispensational study notes) became quite popular in the U.S.A. A key component of this theology is the idea of a pre-tribulation *rapture* (or a "gathering together" of Christians before the "great tribulation" would begin.) This "rapture" would **not** be preceded by any signs. This is a very popular but highly misleading idea which contradicts Matthew, chapter 24, 2nd Thessalonians, chapter 2, and many other relevant passages, showing Jesus' return to be **after** the "great tribulation."

However, despite faulty dispensational assumptions in The Way, the new covenant writings themselves never, ever downplay the vital importance of believing and practicing Jesus' direct words (John 12:44-50). New Testament documents don't deal with Jesus' words as if they belonged to an outdated era. Paul asserted many years **after** Jesus spoke, "If any person advocates different teachings and refuses to agree with the correct teachings of our lord Jesus the Messiah, that is, those teachings which promote a godly life, they are arrogant persons who understand nothing." (1st Timothy 6:3-4a). Obviously, Paul was not a **dispensationalist**, exalting his own words as a new standard which had **replaced** Jesus' sound and reliable words! Also, as 2nd John, verse 9 states, "Everyone who goes beyond the Messiah's teaching, and doesn't continue in it, doesn't have God. Everyone who continues in that teaching [of Jesus himself] has both the Father and the Son."

On top of personally having been "**an arrogant person**", "**understanding nothing**", I had wrongly assumed that Jesus' Kingdom preaching was relevant only to Israel (at certain, special times), and that this Kingdom message was quickly **rescinded** when Israel, as a whole, failed to respond to Jesus' offer to bring it about. How wrong I was! **Repentance** in light of Jesus' Kingdom preaching (Hebrews 2:3/ Mark 1:1 and v.14-15/ Matthew 13:19) is dynamically developed in the newness of Jesus' teaching efforts (Luke 4:43/ 22:28-30) and **then continued** throughout the whole book of Acts: very clearly in Acts 1:3, 6-7, 8:12, 14:22, 19:8, 20:24-25, 28:23 and verses 30-31. All of these emphatic passages in Acts, which display an extended Kingdom focus for many years after the Day of Pentecost (in Paul's ministry - and among others), point boldly to the ongoing relevance of "the Gospel of the Kingdom of God", as taught initially, according to hundreds of verses, by Jesus himself! For more pertinent details, please see *The Amazing Aims and Claims of Jesus (What you didn't learn in church)* by Sir Anthony F. Buzzard.

In my very recent studies, while comparing some interesting aspects of "The Jesus Movement" to "The Way International", (both blossoming since the late sixties), I have noticed an overall **dearth** of genuine Kingdom of God preaching, understanding and teaching, Such is sadly the case, even though Jesus clearly anticipates (Matthew 24:14) the Gospel of the

Kingdom being proclaimed throughout the whole inhabited earth, as a testimony to all nations! Nowadays, there is a vast lack of the fervent, biblical expectation of a worldwide Messianic reign on earth (Revelation 5:9-10 and 11:15-18), Nevertheless, fortunately, I have also found that it is not too late to **repent** (devote oneself to true **change** in mind and heart), upon truly grasping authentic Kingdom priorities.

Among my zealous Way ideas, heartily embraced over 50 years ago, “salvation” (through confessing Romans 10:9), involved exuberantly latching onto an automatic, “done deal” status. To be “born again” meant acquiring “holy spirit” in an irrevocable way. We used a phrase in 1st Peter 1:23 to infer that we had received “holy spirit” as “incorruptible seed”; in other words, a spiritual seed had **already** been placed inside each of us, individually, which could never perish. Some folks refer to this doctrinal concept as “once saved, always saved.”

Furthermore, if we (in The Way) followed systematic instructions to move our mouths and vocalize syllable-like sounds, it was assumed that we were “speaking in tongues” as an undeniable **proof** that we were permanently “born again” of God’s spiritual, implanted seed. “Tongues” were very confidently assumed by us to be real **languages**, even when failing terribly to sound like genuine languages.

I will now simply challenge this assertive complex of salvation-related ideas which I sternly held onto for decades. As you know, I have already dealt briefly with the underlying dispensational mindset which erroneously relegates Jesus’ all important words (including his central heralding of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God) to an outdated time frame. Jesus’ words, in reality, are vital to salvation.

To relegate salvation to a matter of acquiring a “done deal” status, one has to badly ignore the following Scriptures. Jesus’ key parable of the sower (Matthew 13:18-23/ Mark 4:13-20/ Luke 8: 11-15) and the four categories of “soil” (meaning the varying responses to the message of the Kingdom in different hearts) shows that only the last soil category is successful: the one who **understands** the message, who **produces fruit**, and who **holds on to it with an honest and good heart, and through steadfast perseverance** produces fruit. To believe temporarily and then stop believing is not an adequate response! Similarly, in the parable of the true

vine (John 15:1-17), one must **abide** or **remain** in the Messiah's **words** and in his **love** to produce fruit, but to be **disconnected** from the true vine means drying up, being gathered, and being burned. Paul uses a parallel plant analogy in Romans 11:13-24, in which Israel is a metaphorical olive tree into which folks (branches) from a Gentile background have been grafted (by becoming Christian believers). Such real believers must continue to be in awe - and not be arrogant, and they must continue in God's kindness in order **not to be cut off**. No "done deal" salvation status is implied in these significant records!

I know very well how we cleverly dodged such meaningful, **conditional** declarations during my former Way indoctrination, either by explaining away such vital passages, dismissing the gospels and other new covenant books (as if they were not really addressed to Christians), or simply ignoring certain Scriptures. Nevertheless, dozens of other truths paint this same picture of keen "**if**" factors. We must strive, making a continuous effort, to enter through the narrow gate (Luke 13:23-24). (We must persevere.) "And we are His house if, indeed, we hold tightly to our confidence and sense of triumph in our hope (Hebrews 3:6b). According to Colossians 1: 22b-23a, "you" (as Christians) are reconciled by Messiah's death "in order to bring you holy, blameless, and irreproachable into His presence. **This is conditioned upon you remaining in the faith**, securely grounded and established, and **not drifting away** from the hope of the good news" (my emphasis added.) Hebrews 3:14 succinctly declares, "We have become partners with the Messiah if indeed we keep a tight grip on our original confidence firm to the end." Other Scriptural realities heartily concur with such **conditions**.

On top of such parables and statements, one can see the Luke 12:42-46 picture of a believing servant (with genuine free will) who: (A) might stay faithful and eventually get rewarded, or who: (B) potentially becomes abusive and ends up getting condemned as an unbeliever! **Both** possibilities are open to **the same servant**! Many other passages reiterate this same theme of the **need** for persistent, faithful obedience, such as Hebrews 5:9 and Romans 1:5 / 16:26, bracketing the whole book of Romans with the concept of "the obedience of faith!" We should not be gullible and **take God for granted** in a flippant way!

Perhaps the most solemn warning in the Bible about the failure to truly heed and obey Jesus' powerful words can be gleaned by reading Matthew 7:21-27. Personally, some thirty years or so after having adopted an extremely cavalier attitude about my salvation status by Way norms, I found that I needed to openly confess my perpetual sins of adamant arrogance, humbly reevaluate my whole relationship to God (while embracing Kingdom priorities), and seriously take the Matthew 7 warnings to heart, instead of being so presumptuous!

Now, I will briefly touch on The Way's exuberant emphasis on "speaking in tongues" supposedly **for all Christians**, as proof positive of enjoying a permanent "born again" status, I will simply offer a few observations as heartfelt advice.

I had to vividly notice that a proper study of 1st Corinthians, chapters 12, 13, and 14 do **not** fit at all with traditional Way dogma. For example, all of chapter 12, including verses 4-11, deal consistently with God distributing gifts and abilities in very diverse ways, according to His [God's] will. According to verses 28-30 (of chapter 12) **not all** are given the ability to "speak in languages" or to interpret languages, just as **not all** are inherently gifted with being apostles or prophets. It would involve extremely flaky interpretations to contradict that clear passage in 12:28-30 by **literalizing** isolated fragments of a couple of hyperbolic statements in chapter 14, (such as verses 5 and 18), which, in context, clearly indicate that despite the value of "speaking in languages", speaking understandable words is of much, much greater value!

Let's look quickly at the "**but**" word (in the KJV of 1st Cor. 12:7), which we emphasized (in The Way) as if "a package of nine manifestations" is given to **all**, thus, supposedly, being in strong contrast with the overall diversity theme of the whole of chapter 12. In the phrase, "But the manifestation" (singular), the Greek connective **de** ("but" in KJV) can be rendered "and" or even rendered without a word in English (see any modern translation.) No strong **contrast** is ever made. Also, **no translation** of verses 7 to 10 can be twisted to imply that "to one" and "to another" (v. 8-10) really mean "for one profit" or "for one benefit" (from v.7), so that one can **confidently infer** that a package of "all nine manifestations" is poured out freely on **all**

Christians! Such an **innovative** interpretation involves sheer, misleading, man-made theology!

Also, when folks, (in blatant contradiction to 1st Corinthians 12:28-30), try to **lead others into** “speaking in tongues” (or perhaps into practicing another “manifestation”), as if **all** these spiritual “gifts” or “manifestations” were authentically given to all believers, a huge amount of false spirituality takes place! If one is systematically teaching folks (according to a very bizarre, man-made method) into moving their mouths, lips, throats, etc., to vocalize random sounds; that method obviously results in pure gibberish, even if folks are emotionally pumped up into assuming that a real spiritual activity is in place. For years I actually led “practice sessions” to try to help folks **not sound like pure gibberish speakers**, and to help them stop presenting highly dubious “interpretations” of tongues. Nevertheless, such arduous practice sessions never actually helped anyone. To place absolute confidence in what is most likely meaningless gibberish, (and **not** genuine language at all), would be a tremendous tragedy, a great deception.

Ultimately, if one simply speaks nonsensical sounds, there is nothing even close to proof of having even received holy spirit! Also, one cannot truly interpret or translate sheer gobble-de-goop! I recommend staying wary about buying into the modern, easy-going tongues movement! You might want to read about the 1901 history of the “new” concept of “tongues” as proof of being “baptized in holy spirit” (an idea which is **not** biblical) in *Fields White Unto Harvest: Charles F. Parham and the Missionary Origins of Pentecostalism* by James R. Goff, Jr.

Before we close, I would like to comment about **baptism**, another subject about which I have written. The most complete article I have done is the second article of the December, 2021 issue of Focus on the Kingdom, available at focusonthe kingdom.org

Maybe it would be helpful to mention that the words “baptism” (noun) and “baptize” (verb) *literally* mean **washing** and **to wash** - by physically dipping into water. Though these terms are used metaphorically a few times, baptism words have a literal meaning which is clearly indicated in most of their biblical uses. In other words, “baptize” is **never** an ambiguous term meaning vaguely “to immerse” into **whatever**, whether it be water, holy spirit, fire, suffering or something else, according to varying literary

contexts. No use of a "baptize" or "baptism" term is ever unclear or **iffy** in the whole Bible.

You might want to carefully consider the sentence in Acts 1:5 which says, "John, on the one hand, baptized in water, but you will be baptized in holy spirit not many days from now." The word "but" is not the strong contrasting Greek word **alla**, but is the weak connective **de**, which is most often translated: "and." This verse does not say or imply that a dispensationally outdated form of baptism (in mere water) will **be** suddenly **replaced** by the baptism pertinent to a new "administration" (namely, baptism in holy spirit), starting with the Day of Pentecost.

One does not have to read very far into the book of Acts to see easily that water baptism **continued** for many years as a relevant, meaningful practice among knowledgeable Christians! At Pentecost, Peter had called on folks to get baptized (in water) in Acts 2:38 to accompany repentance **before** receiving "holy spirit." Philip baptized Samaritan men and women as a facet of announcing to them the Gospel of the Kingdom of God (Acts 8:12); he later baptized the Ethiopian eunuch (8:36-39). Paul himself was baptized in water (Acts 9:16) to have his sins washed away (Acts 22:16). Very clearly, Peter did in fact baptize the Gentiles of the house of Cornelius, even after they had spoken in bona fide languages (Acts 10:44-48). Years later, the apostle Paul baptized Lydia and her household in Philippi (Acts 16: 14-15), the jailer and his household (16:32-34) and some people in Corinth (Acts 18:8). Just on the surface, one can see that it would be quite ludicrous to insinuate that Victor Paul Wierwille had "rightly divided" the Scriptures (about the baptism subject) more accurately than Peter, Stephen, Ananias, and Paul!

Keep in mind that Jesus' solemn commands in Matthew 28:18-19 are absolutely genuine according to **all** textual evidence. Random quotes from Eusebius do not disprove the accuracy of ancient, biblical manuscripts. The apostles were to: (1) make disciples of all nations, (2) baptize people in the name of the Father (God Himself), and the Son (Jesus, the Son of God), and of the holy spirit (God's powerful interaction with us), (3) teaching people to observe all that Jesus had [directly] commanded them. The phrase about baptizing people is **not** a trinitarian formula, any more than 2nd Corinthians 13:13, which links the gracious favor of the lord Jesus -

with the love of God - and the participation of holy spirit. Also, “the name of the Father, the Son and holy spirit” in Mt. 28:19 is not a wooden formula which contradicts what is said in references like Acts 2:38, “Be baptized in the name of Jesus the Messiah.” Such passages are in total harmony, as simply saying essentially the same truth in different ways. Since fellow humans here on earth can **only** baptize others in water, and **not** in holy spirit, Mt. 28:19 is obviously a simple command in our age for water baptism. Jesus is the only one who ever baptized anyone in holy spirit. Nowadays, only Jesus, the risen, ascended lord, can baptize folks “in holy spirit.”

Some people from my Way background get stuck with a popular, traditional idea derived from a partial quoting of Ephesians 4:5. They say that the phrase “one baptism” must mean choosing superior spirit baptism over mere water baptism. Nevertheless, in context, the list of seven points of unity already designates “one spirit” in verse 4. This list is not really being redundant! So “one baptism” is clearly water baptism in the Messiah, since “one spirit” is already listed.

Several Scriptures portray how deeply meaningful baptism in water is for those who are becoming Christians. The cleansing efficacy of water itself has nothing to do with the whole matter! Water is symbolic, just like bread and wine are symbolic, being physical elements in the celebration of communion. What is vital is the professed response (as in a pledge) of a good conscience toward God (1st Peter 3:21) through the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. One in fact identifies himself or herself with Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6: 3-11/ Colossians 2:12 -15) by being plunged into the water and raised up out of it. Thus, there is a vivid symbol of putting to death the old, sinful self and making a dedication to live for God according to a new life now - as we eagerly await being raised to resurrection life in the future! According to Colossians, chapter 2, triumphant victory now over spiritual enemies is also involved! What a beautiful action, publicly declaring our heartfelt, repentant allegiance to the Messiah whom we are dedicated to obey!

I will close by passing along a few thoughts about having dramatically repented (changed) from what I now see as having been caught up in a narcissistic web of erroneous, false religion and oppressive bondage.

I no longer see a “righteous” identity in the Messiah as something totally divorced from making conscientious choices to do what is **right before God**.

I no longer see concerted efforts to obey God as an underhanded, sneaky endeavor to supposedly **earn** one’s salvation “by works.”

I no longer hold a false dichotomy between “grace” and “faith”, on one hand and “works”, on the other. I no longer believe that “grace” means either passively doing nothing - or having a built-in safety net for **getting away with** sloppy thoughts, words, and actions.

I believe that James 2:14-26 is absolutely relevant to all genuine Christian behavior: “Faith without works (corresponding actions) is dead!”

Clearly, we are **not** saved “by works” done previously in order to somehow **deserve** God’s merciful salvation, **nor** are we saved by the “works of the Mosaic Law” which have been abolished in the Messiah (Ephesians 2:13-16), However, I believe we should be diligent about **doing** the good works which God has definitely called us to practice (Ephesians 2:8-10), instead of casually dismissing the doing of good deeds as if it were a matter of irrelevant “optional” behavior.

I believe that the Gospel of Grace (in Acts 20:24) is absolutely parallel to the ongoing, repentant-rooted preaching of the Kingdom of God! (v. 25)

I believe I should proactively confess my sins and errors to God, while trusting in His loving forgiveness (1st John 1:5-2:2), instead of smugly justifying myself (through arrogant, self-righteous assumptions).

I believe now in truly forgiving, from the heart, any who sin against me (Matthew 6:12, 14-15 and 18:23-35), instead of continuing to hold grudges. **Conditions** for our being forgiven are truly pertinent to us as Christians!

So, “Was I truly a follower of The Way?” Undoubtedly, I was still a loyal follower of many Way Ministry norms for three or four decades, while being quite dedicated and **sincere**.

Like many of my Way companions, I made some good, helpful decisions at times, along with having made some extremely poor choices, honestly, in sort of a hazy “hit and miss” way.

Nevertheless, as long as I blithely disregarded the urgent need to commit myself to **obeying Jesus’ words** (his actual **teachings** in the four gospels), I **was not**, by any means, a follower of **Jesus**, who is authentically: **The Way**, the truth, and the life!

Happily though, biblical **repentance** (a devotion to changed thinking and living) is still possible for one who has suffered debilitating blind spots for decades.

Personally, the active studying of more biblical details, learning to discern errors, embracing Kingdom truths, and finally getting baptized - have been very meaningful steps in moving forward in a godly way.